Duryodhana Repatriation Ceremony
Prepared Remarks for U.S. Attorney Preet Bharara
May 7, 2014

Good afternoon. My name is Preet Bharara, and I am the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York.

I want to extend a warm welcome to Your Excellency Deputy Prime Minister Sok An and the delegation from the Kingdom of Cambodia, Special-Agent-in-Charge Hayes, Mr. Papagiannis, Mr. Bourdonneau and distinguished guests.

Today, we are here for a happy event, and I am so pleased to preside at this ceremony to commemorate the return to the Kingdom of Cambodia of a precious piece of art that was sculpted more than a millennium ago.

That piece of art is the Duryodhana – a 10th Century sandstone sculpture that was looted from a famous Cambodian temple more than 40 years ago.

Before I go any further, let me explain some of the displays:

As you enter our library, you see display cases with photos and drawings prepared by the EFEO depicting the Prasat Chen temple in the 10th Century and today.

You also see, as you enter, an exhibition prepared by UNESCO which describes the 1970 UNESCO convention on the means of prohibiting and preventing the illicit import, export and transfer of ownership of cultural property. This exhibition describes the importance of the Koh Ker archaeological site, the Prasat Chen Temple and the Duryodhana.

You will also see 3-D diagrams depicting the Prasat Chen temple as it stood in the 10th Century and photographs of the temple ruins today.

Finally, you have seen on the screen a short video prepared by EFEO depicting Prasat Chen and its statues.

Next to me is a photograph of the Duryodhana as it looks today.

This exquisite statue is a priceless part of Cambodia's unique cultural history.

The Duryodhana stands five feet tall; weighs hundreds of pounds; and depicts a mythic and hulking Hindu warrior. The statue once stood proudly at the Prasat Chen temple at the historic site of Koh Ker, the capital of the ancient Khmer Empire in Cambodia.

At that temple, the Duryodhana and a companion statue, the Bhima, stood face to face on fixed pedestals, depicted at the moment of preparation for their epic battle, as chronicled in The Mahabharata.

The architecture and statuary of Koh Ker were executed by the finest and most experienced artisans, sculptors and craftsman of the time, and many stood unmolested for a thousand years.

But sadly, in the 1970s, during the period of civil war in Cambodia – the time of the Killing Fields – countless valuable artifacts were plundered from Cambodian temples, including those at Koh Ker. This represented not only a despicable mass looting of priceless art, but also a theft of Cambodia's culture and heritage.

Ultimately, many of these stolen antiquities entered the international art market through organized looting networks.

According to the Amended Complaint, the Duryodhana and the Bhima were stolen from the Prasat Chen temple in 1972. The heads of the statues were literally cut from their torsos and then later the torsos were cut from the pedestals, for ease of transport.

The heads and then the torsos were carried through the jungles of Cambodia and across the Cambodia-Thailand border. The two statues were delivered to an antiquities dealer in Bangkok.

The Duryodhana ultimately made its way to England where it was sold and held in a private collection for more than 35 years.

In 2010, the Duryodhana was imported into the United States, offered at auction in 2011, and expected to fetch $3 to $5 million. UNESCO and the Cambodian Government recognized that the statue being offered for sale was the Duryodhana and alerted U.S. law enforcement.

Following an investigation by HSI, our office filed a civil action, seeking the forfeiture of the statue for the purpose of returning it to the Kingdom of Cambodia. Prosecutors even went to Cambodia to investigate the case.

After almost two years of litigation, we are happy to announce that the sellers of the Duryodhana have agreed to return it to the Kingdom of Cambodia.

By bringing legal action to cause the return of the Duryodhana to the Kingdom of Cambodia, we have reaffirmed our commitment to ensuring that Manhattan does not become a Mecca for stolen art and antiquities.

Unfortunately, our experience shows that there is far too much chicanery in the commercial trade of ancient art. This story ends well, but too many stories of plunder do not.

And so my view is this: Everyone who collects and curates and cares about art needs to be a part of the solution, not the problem. It is my fervent hope that every stakeholder in the art world will be vigilant; will heed red flags; will support doing what's right when it comes to reuniting priceless stolen artifacts with their rightful owners.

In fact, the forfeiture action in this case has already had a salutary domino effect – it has made other museums and institutions aware of the widespread looting of the Prasat Chen temple and led them to voluntarily agree to return other priceless pieces to the Kingdom of Cambodia stolen from the same temple. And that is good news for everyone.

I want to thank our partner Homeland Security Investigations for its excellent investigative work on the case, particularly Special Agents Fong Tchan, Brent Easter, and Daniel Brazier.

I would also like to thank UNESCO for its invaluable assistance. I must commend Eric Bourdonneau, historian and archeologist from the EFEO (École française d'Extrême-Orient), whose field research confirmed that the statue up for sale in New York was, in fact, the missing Duryodhana statue.

Finally, I also want to thank the Assistant U.S. Attorneys and staff from my Office who worked on the forfeiture case: Sharon Cohen Levin, the Chief of the Money Laundering and Asset Forfeiture Unit, Assistant United States Attorneys Alexander Wilson, Sarah Paul, and Christine Magdo, and paralegal Christina LoPresti.

Now, I would like to introduce Special Agent-in-Charge James Hayes, whose office has partnered with us on this and so many other important cases.